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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000576

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA IN GO-SLOW MODE ON TRIBUNAL

REF: BEIRUT 558

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason:
Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PM Siniora's recent trip to Egypt garnered an energy deal that could reduce Lebanon's dependence on Syria, but President Mubarak and Amr Moussa advised steadfastness, not confrontation, in the GOL's political conflict with Syria and its allies in Lebanon. Rumors of a Swiss track to solve the conflict are exaggerated, and Syria is as likely as ever to engage in political violence in Lebanon. On the tribunal, Siniora reported on his lobbying efforts on President Putin and, in thinking about how to convince other UNSC members, mused about a trip to Indonesia. He neither accepted nor rejected the Ambassador's suggestion that the best time to push for Security Council action would be shortly after the presentation of Legal Advisor Nicolas Michel's report, expected in early May. However, while seemingly convinced that Chapter VII is the only option available to create the tribunal, the PM made it clear he is entertaining thoughts of waiting until the expiration of the normal (and presently unconvoked) parliamentary session at the end of May before pushing for a Security Council resolution, to strengthen the argument that the Lebanese domestic process is truly blocked. He would seize the occasion to expose Speaker Berri as obstructing both justice and constitutional process in Lebanon. There may be other reasons for Siniora's reticence to pursue Chapter VII immediately; the PM informed us that pro-government leaders had begun another round of contacts with the opposition to propose a more comprehensive solution to Lebanon's political crisis. End Summary.

EGYPT

¶2. (C) The Ambassador called on Prime Minister Siniora April 24 at the Grand Serail. Siniora's Senior Advisor (and Siniora niece) Rola Noureddine, NEA/ELA officer Ann Donick and Polchief (notetaker) also participated. Siniora offered a read-out of his trip to Cairo the previous day where he had a one-on-one meeting with President Mubarak. Siniora called the Mubarak meeting "very good" but did not go into detail. When pressed on what advice he was given on the political crisis by Mubarak and in a separate meeting with Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, Siniora said the Egyptian

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leaders had told him, "Don't expect much change before a clarification of the situation with Iran." Nevertheless Siniora received a message to stay firm in his confrontation with the opposition in Lebanon. After their meeting Moussa had gone to Qatar to meet visiting UN SYG Ban Ki-moon, Siniora noted.

¶3. (C) In a meeting with the Egyptian Energy Minister Sameh Fehmi, Siniora and his Public Works Minister Mohammad Safadi (Acting Energy Minister in the absence of the resigned Mohammad Fneish) signed an agreement that, the PM believes, will guarantee gas supplies from Egypt through Syria to Tripoli. The GOL has already built its section, linking Tripoli to Homs, Siniora said. Conversion of one power plant in Tripoli from fuel oil to natural gas will save Lebanon \$150 million per year in electricity generation costs, and another plant is being planned. Siniora noted that the new plant would have to be built using "creative" financing, and did not exclude a project on a build-operate-transfer basis. (Note: When asked before the trip about the national security implications of having Lebanon's gas supply pass through Syrian territory, a Siniora aide told us in confidence that Egypt would guarantee Damascus' non-interference in the energy link. End Note.)

SWITZERLAND

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked about rumors of a Swiss-sponsored process to resolve Lebanon's political crisis, and Siniora appeared largely uninformed about it. Noureddine, however, told us that the rumors were just a conflation of three unrelated events: a recent parliamentary exchange program with the Swiss parliament; a passing idea for tribunal talks

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in Switzerland or another neutral country, raised in a conversation between UN Legal Advisor Nicolas Michel and Chamber of Deputies Speaker Nabih Berri (reftel); and a Swiss government-sponsored "round table" (in which Noureddine participated) to discuss "generic topics" such as Lebanese independence, which was attended by Aounist MPs Farid el-Khazen and Ghassan Moukhaiber. The Prime Minister added that the Swiss had paid but "short attention" to the Lebanese crisis. Downplaying the press speculation, Siniora dismissed the possibility of solving the tribunal issue via a Swiss-sponsored process and appeared surprised that the Ambassador had even raised the issue.

SYRIA

¶5. (C) The PM cited with incredulity an article in the pro-Syrian ad-Diyar newspaper questioning his motives and accusing him of being an "American agent" for raising the issue of the Shebaa Farms, over which he concluded Damascus had once again begun to dig in its heels. On a more serious note, he predicted the Syrians would seek, "something to upset the present situation," and that, "they will probably resort to some assassinations." President Mubarak had agreed with this assessment in their conversation the previous day, he noted. Siniora nonetheless deemed that Syria, "doesn't have the capability to create civil strife; only Iran can do that." Iran would not do so, he predicted, because they would then find themselves "fighting on two fronts" in Lebanon and Iraq.

MICHEL VISIT AND NEXT STEPS ON TRIBUNAL

¶6. (C) Asked how he saw the outcome of UN Legal Counsel Nicolas Michel's visit to Beirut, Siniora showed considerable caution and said, "we have to study what were the results of his trip" on the international community. Siniora did not know whether Michel had joined UNSYG Ban in Qatar or in

Damascus, his next stop; when Noureddine doubted he had joined the trip Siniora seemed unconcerned. "There will be a session with the Security Council," he noted. "We will have to wait and see how various members of the Security Council react to Michel's report. In light of my conversations with Putin and other Security Council members, they need to be nicely carried to reach the point of agreeing to a resolution." Siniora added that he had protested to Putin in a lengthy (later defined as 25 minutes) phone call that March 14 leaders, "the victims," were being treated like criminals and the criminals were being treated like victims. He urged Putin to "play a constructive role" in Lebanon, and told him, "we can't forget about the tribunal; it is an ethical matter."

¶7. (C) The Ambassador responded that Siniora needed to do more to "carry" Security Council holdouts to the right conclusion, and Siniora said, "Exactly -- but I can't do it alone! I'm certainly trying. I want everyone to realize I'm exerting every possible effort to arrive at a happy conclusion. At some point we have to realize that all options have been exhausted." Commenting that that point was close, the Ambassador suggested, "When Nicolas Michel reports that all options have been exhausted, that's when we make our push." Siniora considered this and answered, "As the proverb says, you may be wrong by being right too soon."

TIMING THE PUSH

¶8. (C) Addressing inaccurate press reports, the Ambassador clarified that the USG had not requested a second parliamentary petition (demanding a Chapter VII resolution) and that in any event a handful of March 14 MPs had declined to sign the petition, effectively sinking it for now. From the USG perspective, a specific request from Siniora was what was needed, not another Parliamentary petition; a request from the MPs to the UN would be useful only to the extent that it provides strength to Siniora to send an appropriately worded letter himself. Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and his bloc do not want to proceed with anything short of 70 signatures for the Parliamentary petition in any case, lest they appear to be losing support for strong Security Council action. Nevertheless, the Ambassador appealed to Siniora to make a push when Michel delivers his report, taking advantage

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of an expected pro-tribunal momentum, and furthermore to share with the Embassy the text of any letter he would send to the UN in advance. "Once Michel briefs the Security Council, about a week from now, its time to move," he concluded.

¶9. (C) Siniora resisted, noting, "We still have some time before the end of the parliamentary session" which he remembered would take place at the end of May. "I'm just thinking aloud" he insisted, "but this will prove Berri is determined" to stop the tribunal. Waiting until the end of May means we lose the support and leadership of President Chirac, the Ambassador noted. Siniora returned to his theme of getting other UNSC members on board, noting that he was planning a trip to Japan at the end of May. At that point, he mused, he would probably stop over in Indonesia, to work on Indonesia regarding the tribunal and other UNSC action.

BROADER SOLUTION?

¶10. (C) "On the other hand, we've been sending proposals for a national unity government," Siniora remarked. The proposals were based on implementing "specific" policy goals that had been agreed upon between March 8 and March 14 in the early-2006 National Dialogue and in the August 2006 Seven Points. Siniora mentioned March 14 was specifically emphasizing establishment of the tribunal, diplomatic relations with Syria, normalization of relations with the Palestinians, and a resolution of the presidency. Siniora

did not assess the opposition's reaction to this new round of proposals for a comprehensive solution to Lebanon's political crisis.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) On the positive side, the cautious and deliberative Siniiora understands that the only option to creating the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is via Chapter VII approval by the UNSC, and he sees the need to do his homework in lobbying other UNSC members. On the negative side, he is looking at sequencing that differs from ours by about a month: we want to use momentum created by current developments (Michel's visit to Beirut, Ban's trip to Damascus, briefings to the UNSC on those visits) to move now. Siniiora, on the other hand, wants to use the time between now and the expiration of the regular parliamentary session at the end of May to lobby UNSC members and strengthen the case that all domestic options for the tribunal's establishment are blocked. (His argument is that, as long as the parliament could theoretically meet, the tribunal's opponents could tell the Russians et al. that a domestic solution is still possible.) We need to work to align the P-3 and Siniiora's strategies, and we suggest that Washington interlocutors who are meeting with Siniiora's senior advisor Mohammed Chatah this week discuss the timing for a tribunal push with him in light of the outcome of discussions in New York. We also recommend that Washington reinforce with Chatah the need to avoid unpleasant surprises, by quietly sharing with us in advance the text of any letters Siniiora plans to send to the UNSC so that the Lebanese get the benefit of our suggestions on language.

¶12. (C) We note that Siniiora seemed sincere in dismissing the possibility of a Swiss track to solve the tribunal issue, and UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen as late as Monday lunchtime (reftel) did not believe that anything would come out of the Michel-Berri discussion on Switzerland.

But the Lebanese media has been running with stories of rumored and proposed consultations in Switzerland, which is a worrying development: if Berri would report back to Pedersen that discussions in Switzerland are possible on the tribunal, it will become much harder for Siniiora to send a strong letter requesting UNSC action now -- even though, as we are convinced, Siniiora would see Berri's ploy as the delaying tactic it would no doubt be.

¶13. (C) As for Siniiora's new pitch for a solution to the cabinet crisis and its impact on how we move the tribunal forward, we will explore with Lebanon's political leaders who back Siniiora how serious this is. Our initial impression is that nothing will come out of this initiative and that it

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will quickly be relegated to the dustbin of previous ideas on solving Lebanon's cabinet crisis: Siniiora's condition that a new cabinet would accept last summer's seven points and the National Dialogue decisions indicates that he has in mind a new cabinet statement. Berri has been consistently adamant that any unity cabinet would maintain the current cabinet statement (submitted to the Parliament for the July 2005 vote of confidence), with its offensive language about Lebanon's "resistance." We don't see March 14 MPs, who now openly object to Hizballah's arms, re-endorsing the current cabinet statement, and we don't see Berri agreeing to a cabinet statement that accepts the need for the Lebanese state to have a monopoly on arms. Thus Siniiora's initiative (so far advanced only through some comments to the press), if he pursues it, has the sole benefit of making him and March 14 more generally appear reasonable and willing to compromise. But pursuing it would also contribute to the slower-moving sequencing Siniiora favors regarding UNSC action on the tribunal.

FELTMAN